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MEMORIAL SLOAN-KETTERING CANCER CENTER

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August 21st, 1979

Prof. Joshua Lederberg
President
The Rockefeller University
New York, N.Y. 10021

Dear Prof. Lederberg

Many thanks for your Memo/Reply and the enclosed reprints.

Most reviews on Bacterial Transformation begin with statements such as "bacterial transformation was noted first by Griffith" (Bact.Rev., 16:31,1952) or "the first well-authenticated transduction was the type transformation of pneumococcus" (Physiol.Rev., 32:403, 1952). Text books in Microbiology obviously follow the same line and one wonders whether or not Griffith's contribution was absolutely unique in introducing a new concept which would not emerge from other contemporary contributions because of insufficient or unreliable experimental data. It is evident, on the other hand, that the subsequent discoveries by Avery and others using the Pneumococcus model provide a formidable body of evidence that tends to minimize other efforts contemporary to Griffith's work.

Quite fortuitously I focused on the Cantacuzene & Bonciu (1926) paper by reading my father(J.Travassos)'s note published in 1930 in a regionally prestigious journal. What called my attention was that the paper on the transformation of Streptococci was not an isolated work as it inspired subsequent contributions from other laboratories for at least 6 years. Keeping in mind the limitations of methods and criteria at the time (1926), I thought that the concerted contribution of all papers quoted in the ASM Article was so reliable and relevant as that of Griffith (1928), with the first paper being published two years earlier. Why then these reports are not generally quoted in parallel with Griffith's work to introduce the concept of Bacterial Transformation ? After a brief exhumation of the Cantacuzene & Bonciu (1926) paper in your excellent review to Heredity (1948) it again fell into almost complete oblivion in the minds of most microbiologists. Yet, besides challenging Griffith's priority according to the above statements, the series of papers of the ASM article may still surprise us with the high efficiencies of transformation phenomena reported and the possibility of interspecific transformation under the experimental conditions used by Cantacuzene & Bonciu and others.

The ASM article aimed at provoking a reappraisal of these historical contributions so that a simple description of data was given, without comments, to allow the unbiased re-evaluation and criticism.

Thank you again for your attention and interest.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

Luiz R. Travassos
Professor, Fed.Univ.Rio de Janeiro
Vis.Investig.Sloan-Kettering